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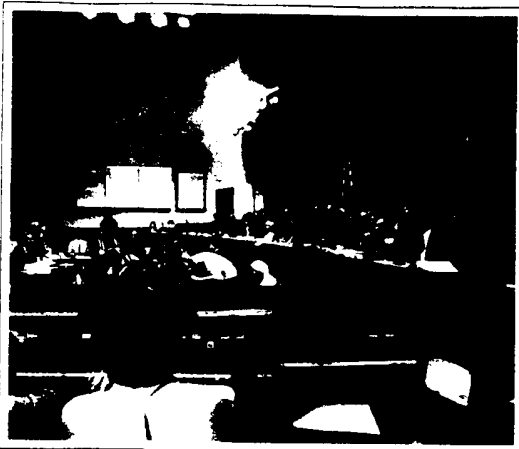
The Culture of Criticism

Former President Jerry Ford phoned from California to say how distressed he was that 26 members of Congress were locked into the Iran-*contra* diatribe, rancorously elbowing one another for television time, while the ailing American economy went unnoticed and untended.

Bob Strauss, former head of the Democratic National Committee, was the guest last week for the 2,000th Sperling Breakfast, a capital institution of high cholesterol and high-powered talk. He sat down, eyed his journalistic adversaries and said, "You're being a little harsh, more than a little harsh, on the presidential candidates. They've been described as midgets, pygmies and nobodies. That is not right."

Though he has made a lot of money defending wayward Government employees from Richard Nixon on down, Attorney Leonard Garment, currently counsel for Robert McFarlane, passionately denounced those in official Washington who "make a career of grabbing the headlines via the mechanism of witness-stoning under the klieg lights."

A James Schlesinger, who used to head the CIA and after that was Secretary of Defense, lamented the marked "decline of



Stoning under the klieg lights, and living on division

decorum" this spring, everybody shouting at everybody else. "Television lives on division rather than interpretation," offered Lloyd Cutler, a constitutional scholar and White House counsel for Jimmy Carter. Ever since his experience around the Oval Office, Cutler has worried about TV's distortion of the Government process. It has grown, not diminished.

Ronald Reagan moves these days with the look of a hunted man, expecting and getting questions from the front and flanks on the Iran mess. Other business, like trade, is often pushed into the shadows.

Criticism, muckraking and its attendant skepticism have always been big business in Washington, a necessary part of a healthy democracy. The worry expressed above is that criticism is becoming the only business in Washington. Are we institutionalizing despair? The failings of humans who try to run this republic are legion, including those of not only Reagan but now Gary Hart, who wanted Reagan's job. And this week we can add a lot of names from the Navy, caught up in the tragedy of the *Stark*. Nothing seems immune. When Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall knocked the sacred 200-year-old U.S. Constitution, the argument took on a life of its own and still echoes through the city.

A good number of the people concerned about the events of this spring have speculated that the more virulent environment may have been created by television's appetite for confrontation. "Television discovered the value of conflict and controversy," Howard Baker, White House chief of staff, told the venerable Scotty Reston of the New York Times.

New York's Senator Pat Moynihan raised hackles a while back by suggesting that the hostility between Government and the media was becoming a culture that could threaten the democratic process, which in the end needs as much understanding and cooperation as criticism. "Each branch of Government is so big and overstuffed it is almost impossible to sit down quietly with one another," declared Cutler. "Someone gets on television by making a sharp attack. This is more a system of shared powers than a lot of people are willing to admit. We've got to learn to get together."

Eighty-one years ago, when he laid the cornerstone of the Cannon House Office Building, Theodore Roosevelt, who knew a thing or two about corruption in Government, told his audience, "Men with the muckrakes are often indispensable to the well-being of society, but only if they know when to stop raking the muck."